

Seattle City Light Ross Dam Construction Photograph Albums, 1938-1948

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Seattle City Light
Title	Seattle City Light Ross Dam Construction Photograph Albums
Dates	1938-1948 (inclusive) 1938 1948
Quantity	1.8 cubic ft., ((8 boxes))
Collection Number	1204-12
Summary	Photographs documenting the construction of Ross Dam on the Skagit River, 1938-1948.
Repository	Seattle Municipal Archives Seattle Municipal Archives Office of the City Clerk City of Seattle PO Box 94728 98124-4728 Seattle, WA Telephone: 206-233-7807 Fax: 206-386-9025 archives@seattle.gov
Access Restrictions	Records are open to the public.
Languages	English
Sponsor	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Historical Note

Seattle City Light provides electricity and electrical and conservation services to its public and private customers. It is the largest public utility in the Pacific Northwest. Public responsibility for electrical energy dates to 1890 with creation of the Department of Lighting and Water Works. In 1902, Seattle voters passed a bond issue to develop hydroelectric power on the Cedar River under the administration of the Water Department. Electricity from this development began to serve Seattle in 1905. A City Charter amendment in 1910 created the Lighting Department. Under the leadership of Superintendent James D. Ross, the department developed the Skagit River hydroelectric power project, which began supplying power to Seattle in 1924. Both public and private power were supplied to Seattle until 1951 when the City purchased the private electrical power supply operations, making the Lighting Department the sole supplier. The Boundary Project in northeastern Washington began operations in 1967 and supplied over half of City Light's power generation. By the early 21st century, approximately ten percent of City Light's income came from the sale of surplus energy to customers in the Northwest and Southwest with the remainder of City Light's financial support coming from customer revenue. The current name of the agency was adopted in 1978 when the Department was reorganized.

Construction of Ruby Dam, Steps One and Two, began in 1937 after City Light received three million dollars from the federal Public Works Administration to begin clearing timber from Ruby Basin. The dam was the third built by Seattle City Light as part of the Skagit River hydroelectric power project. It was renamed Ross Dam in 1939 in memory of James D. Ross, the long-time superintendent of City Light who died in March of that year. The first step of Ross Dam's construction was completed in 1940. The dam was 305 feet high and created a reservoir with a water level at 1380 feet above sea level. Ross Dam was initially constructed for storage rather than power generation.

Step Two in the construction of Ross Dam began in 1943. The dam height was to be raised to nearly 500 feet. Step Three was approved by the Federal Power Commission (FPC) in 1947 and at completion in 1949, the dam stood at 540 feet. Ross Lake, the reservoir behind the dam, rose to 1615 feet above sea level, well above the elevation of the Skagit River at the British Columbia border.

In 1950, the FPC authorized construction of Ross Powerhouse and three generating units. During 1952 to 1956, Ross Powerhouse was constructed and four generators went on-line, doubling the electrical output generated by City Light. The fourth generating unit was installed at Ross Powerhouse in 1956.

The United States Congress created Ross Lake National Recreation Area and the North Cascades National Park in 1968. In 1970, Seattle applied to the FPC for construction of a fourth step of Ross Dam, which would raise the reservoir elevation to 1725 feet. The final water level of Ross Reservoir was not settled until 1984, after lengthy negotiations with the International Joint Commission comprised of representatives from the State of Washington, City of Seattle, and British Columbia, Canada. A fourth step was authorized in 1977, but authorization was revoked in 1984 by an 80-year agreement between Seattle and British Columbia stipulating that the fourth step would not be constructed, that British Columbia would supply power to Seattle in lieu of construction, and that Seattle would pay British Columbia an amount relative to construction costs. This agreement also created the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission, a bi-national agency whose mission is to foster education about the upper Skagit River watershed.

Content Description

The collection consists of nine albums illustrating the construction of Steps One, Two, and Three of Ross Dam. Included are images of construction, construction workers and materials, employees, the dam at various stages of construction, and surrounding terrain.

Prints range in size from 3x5 inches to 8x10 inches, and all are pasted in binders or albums. Prints have negative numbers, and the original negatives are part of the holdings of the Municipal Archives.

One of the more distinctive albums is Album 5, which belonged to William B. Wolfendale, Principal Engineer for Ross Dam. This album contains colorized photographs of Step One, including construction photographs as well as group portraits of those involved in the construction. Individuals pictured in this album include: Glen Smith, William B. Wolfendale, Principal Engineer, several individuals from the Federal Power Commission (including Basil Manly and R. G. Hackett), E. U. Hoffman, Mrs. Hoffman, Mrs. Manly, Ben Torpen, Engineer U.S.E.D., and officials from the General Construction Company. Interiors and exteriors of cottages at Ross Dam are also pictured. Print range: RD61 to RD370; many unnumbered prints included.

Many of the photographs are available in the [online photograph database](#); selected photographs are available as high-resolution images.

Use of the Collection

Preferred Citation

[Title of image, date. Item number.] Ross Dam Construction Photograph Albums, Record Series 1204-12. Box [number], Album [number]. Seattle Municipal Archives.

Administrative Information

Processing Note

Album 5 was unbound for preservation reasons.

Detailed Description of the Collection

The following section contains a detailed listing of the materials in the collection.

Ross Dam: Step One, 1938-1940

Container(s)	Description	Dates
Box		
1	Album 1: Print range R4 to R75; LD756, LD765-66	1938-1939
2	Album 2: Print range RD173 to RD390; LT1066, LT1069, LT1076	1939-1940
3	Album 3: Print range RD153 to RD390	1939-1940
3	Album 4: Print range RD152 to RD375	1939-1940
4	Album 5: William B. Wolfendale album (Includes colorized prints.)	1939-1940

Ross Dam: Step Two, 1943-1945

Container(s)	Description	Dates
Box		
5	Album 6: Print range RD2-26 to RD2-150; L955	1943-1945

Container(s)	Description	Dates
6	Album 7: Print range RD2-28 to RD2-183; L952-959, L975-976; LT1405-1409, LT1464-1469, LT1638	1943-1944

Ross Dam: Step Three, 1947-1948

Container(s)	Description	Dates
Box		
7	Album 8: Print range RD2-345 to RD2-536; LT1026-2069	1947-1948
8	Album 9: Print range RD2-229 to RD2-640; LT2070-2182; L1027-1030	1948

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Dam construction--Washington (State)--Photographs

Dams--Washington (State)--Photographs

Corporate Names :

Seattle City Light

Geographical Names :

Ross Dam (Wash.)--Photographs

Form or Genre Terms :

Photograph albums

Photographic prints

Finding aid prepared by Anne Frantilla
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